Small New Zealand Primary Schools: Current Policy, Its Impact and Some Alternatives

GRAHAM COLLINS

Abstract:

This article examines current educational policy in New Zealand relating to small schools, considers the impact of this policy, and reflects on whether more positive alternatives might be found. Some recent research into the nature of current policy is reported, and its impact in a selective range of small primary school settings is discussed. It is argued that the current "two-track" central policy (which attempts to strengthen some small schools and rationalise others) is failing to achieve either of these goals, basically because it misunderstands or under-estimates the nature of the local community feeling associated with many small schools, and its impact on patterns of inter-school behaviour. After more than a decade of emphasis on self-management, a one-school, one-community mindset has been created in many districts. Unless this mind set is counteracted through new policy that enhances interactions between neighbouring schools, and extends the sense of community beyond the individual school, school re-organisation in New Zealand is likely to remain problematic.

New Zealand has always had a high proportion of small primary schools within its total school network, and until the 1980s this was regarded as a strength of the system (Nash, 1980). However, following more than a decade of self-managing policies, the viability of small schools and their ability to provide quality education in the future has come under question (Education Review Office, 1999). During 2003, professional concern over the future of the small school network in New Zealand has reached new heights because of plans to

re-organise schooling in a number of areas. For example, Bruce Adin, president of the New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI) told a rural and teaching principals' conference in Hamilton in May, 2003, that he expected nearly a thousand New Zealand schools to be involved in school re-organisation in the next decade, with up to half this number to be lost. "That's the biggest re-organisation of education in New Zealand I've ever known", he stated (Adin, 2003, p. 7).

According to the Ministry of Education, this re-organisation is necessary because of population change – while school populations continue to grow in some New Zealand urban areas, in other (mainly rural) areas roll numbers are already falling and are scheduled to fall further in the next decade (Ministry of Education, 2003). By the middle of 2003 "Area Reviews" had been announced in more than a dozen districts as the Ministry of Education attempted to create a reconfiguration of schools that could deliver appropriate education in rural areas and small towns, in view of changing demographic patterns (Quirke, 2003). At the end of 2003 the area review process also commenced in selected urban areas (NZEI, 2004, p. 6). Effective school re-organisation is clearly a key government policy priority for education at present and in the immediate future (Mallard, 2003).

However, area or network reviews are just one of a number of recent government policies that are currently having a major influence on small primary schools. My recently completed doctoral study on the impact of small school policy in New Zealand has identified two different types of policies:

- those designed to reduce or rationalise the network; and
- those designed to enhance or strengthen the network

(Collins, 2003).

Clearly the policy of Area Review and the associated Educational Development Initiative (which provides a financial incentive for network rationalisation by redistributing the property part of the saving made from network reductions to the surviving schools), fall into the first type of policy. However, in 2001 and 2002, when the first area reviews were being undertaken, other policies were being introduced to assist small schools in various ways. For example the School Administration Support Cluster (SASC) policy was formalised in the 2002 budget. This aimed to encourage small schools to co-operate in local groups ("clusters") to make school administration for the group more efficient than it would be if each school tried to

manage this on its own (Ministry of Education, 2002). The report of the School Staffing Review Group (Ministry of Education, 2001) made explicit provision to double the amount of release time available to small school principals in the following three years, to support teaching principals in their educational leadership role (p. 2).

This article considers the impact of the current two track policy on small schools in New Zealand. It sets out to do three things. Firstly, it will review in greater detail the evolution of recent state policy in New Zealand towards small schools. Secondly, it will report on recent research in one New Zealand region (the Central Districts) into the impact of these policies in a number of different small school settings. Thirdly, it will conclude with a brief consideration of whether alternative policy possibilities might achieve school re-organisation goals more effectively.

1. The Evolution of Recent Policy Towards Small Schools in New Zealand

Small schools in New Zealand over the past two decades have been influenced both by general policies (applying to all schools) and specific policies (applying to small schools only). This part of the article will deal with each of these types of policy in turn.

Firstly, however, some relevant background information is required. Sixty percent of all New Zealand primary schools currently have a roll of less than 200 (that is, they are "small" schools), and twenty percent have a roll of less than 50 (that is, they are "smaller" small schools). Today, New Zealand is one of the few Western educational systems in which small primary schools form the majority (Education Review Office, 1999, p. 46). In most other Western educational systems the proportion of small schools has dropped over the twentieth century because of two factors – urbanisation and consolidation (OECD, 1983). New Zealand is now highly urbanised (Chittenden, 2002), so the preservation of the network of small schools here from the early days of the twentieth century right up the present is usually explained by New Zealand analysts in political terms, in particular, as an indication of the strong influence of the farming vote on politicians, in a society with an economy still largely dependent upon primary production (McLaren, 1974, p. 66). However, in the last fifteen to twenty years, the New Zealand economy has diversified significantly (Belich, 2001, p. 453). It is therefore not surprising that,

from an international perspective, the possibility of rationalising the small school network in New Zealand has come to be a significant policy option in the last ten years or so.

As far as general policy is concerned, in the self-managing administrative environment that was initiated for all New Zealand schools following the major restructuring of educational administration in 1989, many small schools experienced a high degree of initial stress (Robertson, 1991). Much of this stress arose from the dual role of teaching principals in small schools, trying to maintain quality in their teaching on the one hand, and at the same time respond to the new administrative and managerial demands arising from self-management (Wylie, 1997). In the first half of the 1990s, teaching principals faced both a range of new administrative responsibilities and a sweeping curriculum reform process (Butterworth & Butterworth, 1998). In the second half of the 1990s, as workload remained much higher for teaching principals than for other principals, their job dissatisfaction rose and principal turnover increased (Livingstone, 1999). By 1999 many small schools, especially "smaller" small schools in the more remote areas, were creating a compliance problem for ERO, which reported a need to carry out a much higher proportion of "discretionary reviews" amongst small schools than larger schools (Education Review Office, 1999, p. 12).

Immediately after the election of 1999, the new Minister of Education, Trevor Mallard, set up a cross-sectoral group which he chaired, to investigate the nature of current workload issues in the school sector, and to recommend preferred strategies for dealing with them. In analysing the nature of the workload problem, the review group concluded that:

> Increasingly complex curricular and societal problems have made it progressively more difficult for the pastoral and educational relationship between student and teacher to be maintained and developed (in all schools). Schools serving less affluent communities have proportionally greater demands placed on them ... than do schools in more affluent areas. The current staffing regime does not serve small schools as well as it serves larger ones. For these reasons, the review group's recommendations focus on teaching staff entitlement (in these schools) as the most effective way to achieve the Group's objectives. (Ministry of Education, 2001, p. 1)

Amongst the major recommendations of the group was the proposal that for primary schools a new staffing component for "school leadership" be created, to complement the already existing staffing entitlement for "management". This new entitlement would be weighted so that it delivered more, proportionally, to smaller than to larger primary schools (MOE, 2001, p. 2). Specifically, the group recommended that a doubling of principal release time for those in primary schools with a roll of less than 180 be progressively introduced from July 1, 2002 (Ministry of Education, 2001, p. 8).

Before 1990, education policy in New Zealand targeted specifically towards small schools was characterised by notions of benevolent support. For example, in 1952 the New Zealand Department of Education claimed that "few countries, if any, have done more to place rural and urban children on the same footing as New Zealand; and this is, perhaps, New Zealand's most notable educational achievement" (quoted in Nash, 1980, p. 6). However, immediately after the election of the new National Government in November, 1990, things began to change. The new Minister of Education, Lockwood Smith, promptly set up a committee of officials to review and report on the viability of small schools. The report, published in April 1991, featured a recommendation from the Treasury and State Services Commission representatives on the committee that all schools should be funded in future by a roll-driven formula, which would remove the "present subsidy available to smaller schools" (Ministry of Education, 1991, Appendix GG). However, submissions received by the Review Committee were almost unanimous in their support for the retention of small schools (Ministry of Education, 1999, Appendix AA).. The committee therefore recommended that a group representing the Ministry of Education, the School Trustees' Association and the two main teacher unions, be set up to develop comprehensive guidelines for the "rationalisation of educational provision" (Ministry of Education, 1991, p. 54). In November 1991, the guidelines, known as the "Educational Development Initiative" (EDI), were published. Under this policy, schools and districts were encouraged to consider ways in which the structure of schooling in their locality could be made more effective and efficient for providing quality education. Districts were offered incentives to participate, such as the redirection of "freed" resources to new sites, and the provision of resource support for the restructuring process involved (Education Development Initiative,

p. 5). The EDI guidelines did not set a trigger number for any particular type of school to become involved in merger or closure talks. However, the guidelines did make the point that education in a school with a roll of 25 was more than twice as expensive per head on average as in a school with a roll of 50. They also indicated that any savings in mergers at this level would be retained by the participating schools (p. 6).

The 1991 EDI guidelines were essentially voluntary, asking communities to offer themselves for the processes outlined. It was hoped that the financial incentives available would provide a sufficient carrot. Even with these incentives, however, by November 1993 few schools or districts had voluntarily offered to participate in EDI talks. Following the election of that month (with a big drop in the government majority) the EDI policy was given a much lower profile in its next term (Butterworth & Butterworth, 1998, p. 216).

State policy towards small schools after 1996 can best be described as increasingly following a "two-track" strategy (Collins, 2003). While new policy was developed to try to strengthen some small schools, the EDI policy remained on the books, and was again actively pursued for other small schools, particularly in the areas where demographic trends and projections suggested rationalisation was the most appropriate response. As a result, in 2003 the number of school closures or mergers was 35, after averaging about 10 per year during the 1990s (NZEI, 2004, p. 6).

As far as new policy for strengthening small schools was concerned, in 1997 a School Administrative Support Cluster (SASC) programme was introduced in pilot form. The stated aim of the pilot was to try to reduce the workload of principals and trustees in rural primary schools by providing seed funding for co-operative administrative arrangements between clusters of small schools. The pilot was initiated as one outcome of the negotiations associated with the formation of the National-led coalition government of the day. The pilot was extended in 1999, after an independent evaluation of its value found that principals involved felt it reduced their isolation and assisted them to manage their workloads. Then, following the change of government to a Labour-led coalition, in 2001 the programme was formalised on an ongoing basis, with continuous annual funding being increased from $1 million per year to $2.7 million per year (Ministry of Education, 2002, p. ii).

At the same time, in the lower North Island (the area in the country with the greatest concentration of one and two teacher schools) the Ministry of Education initiated a series of "area reviews" in rural areas where school age population appeared to be falling most severely. Using a model formulated to review the schooling provision in Wainuiomata in 2000-2001, between 2001 and 2003 area reviews have taken place in the districts of Taumarunui, Marton, Opunake, Dannevirke, Masterton and Taihape. All of these places are small rural service towns in the Central Districts with increasingly under-utilised schooling provisions in the town and with a large number of small schools in the adjacent rural district (Johnson, 2003). In 2003, area reviews were also started in other parts of the country with a similar demographic profile (Quirke, 2003).

2. Results of Recent Research Into the Impact of the Current Two Track Policy

In 2002 and 2003 I examined the impact of current educational policy on small primary schools in one New Zealand region – the Central Districts region of the lower North Island (Collins, 2003). During this study I examined policy texts and interviewed those involved in current policy implementation. Individual and focus group interviews were also conducted with a number of teaching principals from both "larger" and "smaller" small schools. This part of the paper provides a summary of the results.

Analysis of the key policy texts indicated two general patterns. Firstly, within the major "rationalising" document examined, the updated EDI guidelines (Education Development Initiative, 2001), there was confusion over whether "efficiency" or "effectiveness" was the policy goal; and there was also confusion over whether "negotiation" or "consultation" was the process proposed. In some places in this document the purpose of the network rationalisation is said to be so that the money currently spent on schooling infrastructure and property maintenance can be redirected to curriculum and student needs. In other places the goal is said to be to ensure that all students receive a quality education (Collins, 2003, p. 204). In some places the document refers to a process of negotiation occurring between the Ministry of Education and the boards and communities involved; in other places the document suggests that the process is one of consultation only, with the Ministry and the Minister

having final decision-making power (p. 206). Secondly, within the major "strengthening" text examined, the current School Administrative Support Cluster (SASC) guidelines (Ministry of Education, 2002), there was confusion about what were the limits to the administrative processes that clusters might co-operate over; and there was also confusion over whether short-term or long-term co-operation was the ultimate goal. The pilot SASC programmes (1999–2001) aimed clearly at reducing the administrative burden faced by small schools. However, the aims of the 2002–2006 programme are rather broader – to facilitate co-operative and innovative administrative arrangements that help reduce workload, allow more time to focus on educational outcomes and assist in the effective management of schools. In addition, projects that sit outside these parameters, such as scoping possible forms of shared or alternative governance, may also be approved (pp. 1-2). The 2002–2006 programme makes money available for approved projects for a maximum of two years only. Yet the policy as a whole states that its aim is to create sustainable *long-term* school administration systems within smaller schools (p. 2).

Analysis of the interviews with officials involved in implementation of current small school policy indicated that changing demographic patterns played a key role in shaping their thinking about the future of the school network (Collins, 2003, p. 231). They were strongly influenced by recent Ministry school roll projections showing that in the next ten years many of the current three and four teacher schools in the country would fall in size to two teachers, significant numbers of two teacher schools would fall to sole-charge, and a number of sole charge schools would no longer be viable (Coppen, 2002). They tended to make two key policy assumptions about small school behaviour (Collins, 2003, p. 232). The first assumption was that stronger small schools (in demographic terms) in any area would work collaboratively with weaker schools to strengthen the small school network across the district. The second assumption was that weaker small schools (in demographic terms) would willingly consolidate with the weakest schools in their neighbourhood to rationalise the network as a whole. However the principalship data gathered in the study cast doubts on whether either assumption about school behaviour patterns actually holds true.

In analysing the data from my interviews with 16 small school principals from across the Central Districts, I used a conceptual framework adapted from Gewirtz (2002). Gewirtz classifies "stronger" schools in market terms as being schools with a recent history of roll growth, situated in an area where roll numbers are predicted to at least hold in the medium term future. "Weaker" schools, according to Gewirtz, are schools where the roll has been dropping in recent times and the school is located in a district where rolls are anticipated to fall in the future (pp. 72-73). In my study, about half the principals I interviewed were in "stronger" schools and the other half were in "weaker" schools.

Analysis of the principalship interviews indicated that principals of "stronger" schools were willing to co-operate with neighbouring schools for short term benefit (for example, through SASC projects). However, they felt no particular loyalty to the local network of schools nor inclination to work in collaboration with "weaker" neighbours to strengthen the local network as a whole. Instead, "strong" school principals in this study saw it as a Ministry responsibility to initiate interventions or supports that might assist "weaker" schools. "Weaker" school principals in my study were no more likely than their "stronger" colleagues to collaborate with their weak neighbours. Instead, they were much more likely to compete vigorously with these neighbours for the declining total student pool in the local area.

Overall, then, the schools exhibited a markedly more competitive than co-operative attitude towards their neighbours. Further analysis of the interview data (Collins, 2003, p. 289) indicated two main lines of reasoning suggested for this by the principals. First, according to some principals, this was necessary as a career development strategy. To get noticed outside one's own district and to make one's mark as a principal, it was necessary to demonstrate capability in promoting school growth, as this was what boards of trustees of larger schools were looking for in their principal appointments, according to this line of thinking. Such reasoning is generally supported by the findings of the 2001 ERO report on the appointment of school principals (p. 6) Secondly, other principals adopted competitive strategies to maintain what the local community saw as the market edge of their school. Maintaining the present roll numbers in the future would ensure class sizes remained low in these schools, but a slight decrease in roll size in future would cause a significant increase in class numbers. (The logic

of the reasoning here appears impeccable: a small New Zealand primary school with a roll of 55 is staffed by three teachers. If the roll falls to 54, the school is staffed by two teachers, and class sizes increase by a half.)

3. Some Possible Future Policy Alternatives

While current policy assumes schools will be willing to take the initiative in planning and arranging co-operative projects with their neighbouring schools to either strengthen or rationalise the local network, the data from these principals suggest otherwise. Schools in my study exhibited a strong tendency to act according to their own interests, rather than in the interests of the local network. Stronger incentives than presently exist may be needed to change this conditioning. This reaction has been created by over a decade of "self-management" rhetoric (p. 300). Because of this conclusion from my research, and as a result of topical interest, Massey University College of Education decided to host a forum in September, 2003, on the future of rural schooling in the Central Districts. Its aim was to encourage local communities to adopt a proactive rather than reactive response to current plans to re-organise the small school network in the region. This section of the paper will briefly describe the forum process and its outcomes.

The Future of Rural Schooling in the Central Districts Forum

This forum took place in Palmerston North on Friday and Saturday, September 5-6, 2003. It aimed to bring together policy makers, researchers, support personnel and school representatives into a facilitated process where views could be exchanged and positive alternatives might be shared. About 150 people attended, with about a third being trustees, a third principals and the final third being educational officials (including the key Ministry officials responsible for implementing current policy).

There were three themes explored by forum participants:

- The background facts about the current policy framework and its rationale;
- An overview of innovative approaches that have already been tried in various parts of the country;
- A sharing of views about what might be needed now to encourage more innovative responses from schools and districts.

To explore the third theme, participants were broken up into heterogeneous discussion groups of principals, trustees and education sector workers. The task of each of the groups was initially to identify the current barriers to schools becoming proactive self-managers of their futures, in the face of the demographic challenges ahead, and then to identify the likely support that boards of trustees would need to lead this process in local communities. Facilitated forum groups came up with four key sets of ideas for how more pro-active school re-organisation might be encouraged (pp. 304-305).

Firstly, a number of current *local* blocks which prevented local communities being more proactive were identified. The most significant blocks were the desire in many local communities to retain what was seen as the unique characteristics of the local school and the wish to retain the local identity and control of "our" school. The school is perceived in many places as the only "service" or institution that the community really has management over, and in some cases may be the only such facility left in the community. The other major block identified by participants in the forum was characterised as local suspicions. Boards of Trustees often viewed with considerable suspicion the motives of any neighbouring school that expressed the desire to discuss or explore alternatives. For many boards, therefore, there was a concern over how others might view them if they suggested a rationalisation or strengthening project to their neighbours.

Secondly a number of blocks originating at the *national* level were identified. Amongst the most significant of these were:

- A current lack of "upfrontness" about the details of the long term plans for rural schooling over the next ten years;
- The current lack of clarity about the outcomes sought from the change. Schools need a clear statement about whether property rationalisation or improved student learning is the focus; and
- The apparent failure so far to recognise that "you can't fix a bad school by amalgamation", and that other forms of intervention will be needed in these cases.

Thirdly, a range of suggestions was made for reducing or overcoming the current localised blocks. It was felt that a central prerequisite to Boards of Trustees and communities becoming more proactive was the need for boards to have better information than at present, so that they

might "think with their heads, not with their hearts." It was suggested that all school boards needed to receive demographic information about their school and other schools in the local community. It was also suggested that a range of self-review tools based on the criteria used in current reviews could be distributed, so that boards might self-assess their own viability. Boards then needed to be made aware of the national case studies such as those presented at the forum, as examples of proactive possibilities in response to demographic changes. Further proactive process support would then be needed for constructive dialogue to begin with neighbouring schools – independent high quality facilitators would be needed in many districts, to overcome local barriers.

Fourthly, forum participants made forceful comments on a number of changes needed in the role of the Ministry of Education if it wished to encourage genuine community leadership for local change. Some of the suggestions related to strengthening rural education; others to improving the rationalisation process. Suggestions from forum participants for strengthening rural education included:

- Providing a more positive profile for rural schooling in the media and amongst the local teaching fraternity; and
- Improving incentives for rural schools so that there is a clear "framework for success". These incentives would aim at addressing issues such as attracting appropriate staff, relieving and release teachers; supporting and encouraging aspiring principals into rural areas; and developing supports and the resources needed for the type of multi-level teaching programme and classroom management needed in all smaller schools.

Suggestions for national initiatives to encourage more pro-active school re-organisation included:

- Providing or funding "road shows" to bring together local community representatives in all areas in a non-threatening milieu to begin the future-oriented dialogue;
- Establishing or funding trials of alternative forms of governance and management arrangements (apart from consolidation on one site) that schools might consider;
- Providing a case manager or enhanced liaison officer for clusters of schools who would have a strong relationship with and knowledge of local school needs and national trends; and

- Offering better incentives for co-operation between schools. While the SASC programme was seen as one vehicle for this, it was felt that it would benefit from a broader focus, which would include: encouraging co-operative projects designed to improve student learning outcomes; sharing teaching expertise; and possibly arranging funding for appropriate projects.

Conclusions

This article has suggested that present policy towards small schools in New Zealand is failing to achieve either of its current aims of the rationalising of some small schools, or the strengthening of others. In particular, it has argued that more than a decade of self-managing policies in New Zealand has created a one-school, one-community mindset that is now the major barrier to more co-operative behaviour amongst small schools. It seems clear that the way forward, as suggested at the recent Massey University Forum on the Future of Rural Schooling, is for future policy to focus on building a wider sense of community at the local level, through encouraging a greater degree of inter-school interaction.

In examining internal community building within schools in the United States, Sergiovanni (1992) has suggested that an extended process is involved, requiring a range of facilitative leadership behaviours:

1. Bartering – an exchange, to get things moving
2. Building – raising group expectations
3. Bonding – developing shared commitments and purposes
4. Banking – empowering others to lead.

It might be that external community building between schools in New Zealand requires a similar set of community building stages, based perhaps on the four "C"s, rather than the four "B"s:

1. Colleagueship – developing professional linkages between neighbours
2. Co-operation – short term structural linkages
3. Collaboration – longer term structural linkages
4. Consolidation – bringing together into a single unit.
(Collins, 2003, p. 297).

In future, small school policy might need to target a new range of incentives to try to encourage more co-operative and collaborative activities between schools. In particular, separate incentives might be needed to encourage stronger schools (in market terms) to collaborate with weaker schools; and for weaker schools to seek more innovative responses to their current problems than just merger or closure. An enhanced SASC programme might be an appropriate vehicle for such incentives to be delivered. Through the process of jointly managing co-operative projects that such a programme might encourage, the sense of community in neighbouring schools and local districts in the future might be naturally expanded beyond just the community that services one particular school. Unless there is some sort of externally-promoted community-building process of this type, added to the facilitation already available through the Area Review process, it would seem that small school re-organisation in New Zealand is likely to continue to be problematic.

Postscript

This review relates to the period prior to February, 2004, when the Minister of Education proposed a five-year "moratorium" on future area reviews. However, the general conclusions reached in the article have not been superseded.

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The author

Graham Collins is a Senior Lecturer in the Social and Policy Studies in Education Department at Massey University. He has worked for a number of years in the School Administrative Support Cluster (SASC) programme for small schools in the Central Districts, based at Massey University, and recently completed a doctorate on principalship and policy in small New Zealand primary schools.